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ABSTRACT

This study compared the potential for child abuse among three ethnic groups, when age, educational attainment, and marital status were controlled for in a sample of ethnically diverse, low-income mothers residing in a large metropolitan area. Participants (n=195) were between 15 and 45 years and were enrolled in the Women, Infants, and Children federal nutrition program. Forty-six percent of the participants were African-American, 24 percent were Latino, and 20 percent were Anglo-American. About 60 percent were married. About 40 percent of the participants had some education beyond high school, about 30 percent had completed high school, and about 30 percent had not completed high school. The potential for child abuse was measured by a shortened version of the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI). Findings revealed that subscale scores for loneliness, rigidity, problems, and social and self-control were very similar for the three ethnic groups. The total scores and the parental satisfaction measure were also similar. Analysis of the scores indicated that there were no significant differences among the three ethnic groups on any CAPI subscales, the total scores, or the parental satisfaction measure. The findings may indicate that the shortened version of the CAPI is not sensitive enough to measure fine differences for the potential for child abuse among ethnic groups. (Contains 44 references.) (KDFB)

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ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND THE POTENTIAL FOR CHILD ABUSE

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The **Child Abuse Potential Inventory** consisting of **four** sub-scales--loneliness; rigidity; problems; and social & self-control issues was administered to 195 ethnically diverse, low-income mothers enrolled in the WIC program to examine their potential for child abuse. Data were analyzed using ANCOVAs, controlling for the subjects' age, marital status, and educational attainment, and the Tukey test of significance was utilized for post hoc analyses.

- There were no significant differences between African-American, Latino, and Anglo-American mothers in their **overall** attitudes related to the potential for child abuse.

- Also, there were no significant ethnic differences in the mothers' attitudes concerning **rigidity, loneliness, problems, and social and self-control issues**.

- Finally, ethnicity also was **not** related to parental satisfaction.

ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND THE POTENTIAL FOR CHILD ABUSE

Child abuse and neglect is one of the most serious social problems in the United States at the present time (Hanna-Wasik & Roberts, 1994). More than two million cases of child abuse and neglect are reported annually to child protection agencies throughout the United States (Daro & Mitchell, 1990). According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (1993), almost 2,000 children die as a consequence of maltreatment each year. Authorities believe that the actual number of fatal cases are probably higher because numerous reported deaths are attributed to causes such as illnesses and/or accidents (Davidson & Moore, 1996). In addition to these reported cases, researchers estimate that about 10% of all families in the U.S. have the potential for child abuse (Ayoub & Jacewitz, 1992; Browne & Saqi, 1988; Egeland & Brandgnell, 1979). Child abuse and neglect, therefore, is an issue of profound concern to family professionals (Hartz, 1995).

There is consensus among researchers that parental abusive behavior is a consequence of the collective impact of a myriad of individual, family, community, and socio-cultural factors. Several factors have been linked to child abuse and/or neglect. Some of these factors include low parental self-esteem, premature birth, children with behavior problems, poor social support systems, and the use of corporal punishment (Schickedanz, Schickedanz, Hansen & Forsyth, 1993). Other risk factors include alcohol abuse by parent or caretaker (Fernularo, Stone, Barnum, & Wharton, 1986); single parenthood and having multiple children with

limited spacing (Buchholz & Korn-Bursztyn, 1993). The strongest predictors of physically abusive behaviors are stress, lack of family resources, lack of social support, and/or a combination of these three factors (Buchholz & Korn-Bursztyn, 1993; Casanova, Domanic, McCanne, & Milner, 1992; Howze & Kotch, 1984; Mollerstrom, Patchner, & Milner, 1992). These factors have also been found to be related to the **potential** for child abuse (Casanova et al., 1992; Mollerstrom et al., 1992; Murphy, Orkow, & Nicola, 1985).

For the purposes of this study, child abuse was defined as parental **behavior** which does not meet cultural expectations, which departs from social norms in its intensity and its appropriateness (Garbarino, 1977). Whereas child abuse potential was defined as the **possible inclination** to be abusive, as determined by the abridged version of the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (Milner & Wimberley, 1979).

The perceived burden of children in the family are highly influenced not only by culture but also by the circumstances in which parenting occurs (Goldsteen & Ross, 1989; Umberson, 1989). Demands are exacerbated for mothers who live with their children in conditions of poverty. McLoyd (1990) contended that lower educational levels and increased emotional stress of low-income families that typify many ethnic families contribute to these parents being less sensitive, involved, and supportive.

The parental role of minority parents is even more difficult within a highly complex, pluralistic American society, with great cultural diversity. Ethnicity has

been acknowledged as integral to the understanding of a person's mental health (Gaw,1993; Serafica, Schwebel, Russell, Isaac, & Myers, 1990). Ethnic considerations have increasingly been recognized as a critical factor in the assessment, problem prevention, strengthening, and in the treatment of an individual's problems and dysfunctions (Tharp, 1991; Vargas, & Koss-Chioino, 1992). To be a parent from a ethnic minority group in the U.S. is particularly difficult, demanding, and stressful (Davis & Proctor, 1989). Never the less, there is limited research on the potential for abuse among ethnically diverse, low-income parents.

Julian, McKenry, and McKelvey (1994) pointed out that parents from ethnic minority groups tend to use very similar parenting techniques to socialize their children as do Anglo-American parents. While other researchers have concluded that parenting strategies are highly influenced by cultural norms and expectations (Buriel, Mercado, Rodriguez, & Chavez, 1991; Hampton, 1987; Lindholm & Willey, 1986; Lin & Fu, 1990; Medora, Wilson, & Larson, 1996; Rounds, Weil, & Bishop, 1994). Although researchers have concluded that ethnicity is linked to parenting strategies, there is a paucity of literature on whether ethnicity is related to the potential for child abuse when age, educational attainment, and marital status of low income mothers (confounding variables) are controlled.

Objectives:

The primary objective of this study was to compare the potential for child abuse when age, educational attainment, and marital status are controlled for in a

sample of ethnically diverse, low-income mothers residing in a large metropolitan area. The ethnic groups included Anglo-Americans, African-Americans, and Latinos. Another objective of the study was to investigate whether there was a relationship between ethnicity and the potential for child abuse and parental satisfaction.

Method:

The subjects consisted of 195 low-income mothers who lived in a large urban area on the west coast of the U.S. Participants were between the ages of 15-45 years and were enrolled in the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) federal nutrition program. Ninety (46%) of the subjects were African-American, forty seven (24%) were Latino, thirty-nine (20%) were Anglo-Americans. One hundred and nineteen (61%) of the subjects were married at the time of the study and seventy-six (39%) were single. Seventy-six (39%) subjects had some education beyond high school, while sixty (31%) had completed high school and fifty-nine (30%) mothers had not completed high school.

The potential for child abuse was measured by a shortened version of the **Child Abuse Potential Inventory** (CAPI) (Milner & Wimberly, 1979). This version of the CAPI consists of 37 of the best items from a list of 160 items which assesses an individual's potential for child abuse (Milner & Wimberley, 1979). The CAPI has four subscales: (a) loneliness; (b) rigidity; (c) problems; (d) social and self-control. The CAPI is a screening device that was designed to differentiate abusers

from nonabusers (Milner, 1980). This instrument is reported to distinguish at-risk groups (Ayoub, Jacewitz, Gold, & Milner, 1983; Milner & Ayoub, 1980).

The **loneliness** subscale consists of seven items which assesses feelings about being alone and feeling rejected. The **rigidity** subscale comprises of 15 items which measures dimensions of order and fear of failure related to home, children, and self. The third subscale, **problems** consists of nine items which focuses attention on problems with self, friends, and family. Finally, the fourth subscale, **social and self control** has six questions which measure the fear of losing self-control, and not having oneself or one's feelings understood (Milner & Wimberly, 1979). The CAPI is reported to have good criterion validity and .96 split-half reliability (Milner & Ayoub, 1980; Milner & Wimberly, 1980).

A four-item **parental satisfaction** scale was also used to measure the degree of parental satisfaction. Parental satisfaction was measured by four items scored on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "**strongly agree**" to "**strongly disagree**". The items were: "I like being the parent of this child"; "Parenting this child is one of the best things in my life"; "I enjoy spending time with this child"; and "I participate in activities with this child". The Cronbach reliability for this scale was .85.

Data were analyzed using the analysis of variance (ANOVA) test and the Tukey test of significance. The .05 level of significance was applied in testing the level of significance.

Results:

The scores on the shortened version of the CAPI may range from 0 to 37. **Higher scores signify a lower potential for child abuse** and **lower scores imply a higher risk for child abuse.** Of a possible total 37 points, the minimum points scored were 2.00, and the maximum points scored was 35.00. The mean score for the entire sample on the CAPI was 21.36, with a standard deviation of 6.51.

The mean scores and standard deviations for the shortened version of the CAPI sub-scales, the CAPI total scale and the parental satisfaction measure for each ethnic group are shown in Table 1. The scores in Table 1 show that the shortened CAPI sub-scale scores for **loneliness, rigidity, problems, and social and self control** were very similar for the three ethnic groups-- - Anglo-American, African-American, and Latinos (see Table 1). The same held true for the total CAPI scores and the parental satisfaction scores. ANCOVAS demonstrated that there were **no** significant differences between the three ethnic groups on any CAPI sub-scales, the total scores or the parental satisfaction measure.

Discussion and Implications For Family Life Educators:

Although previous researchers (Buriel, Mercado, Rodriguez, & Chavez, 1991; Hampton, 1987; Lindholm & Willey, 1986; Lin & Fu, 1990; Medora, Wilson, & Larson, 1996; Rounds, Weil, & Bishop, 1994) have shown significant differences between the parenting strategies among these three ethnic groups, it appears that these three ethnic groups—Anglo-Americans, African-American, and Latino may

not differ on their potential for child abuse as measured by the shortened version of the CAPI.

Based on the findings, it may be that the shortened version of the CAPI is not sensitive enough to measure fine differences for the potential for child abuse between ethnic groups. Further research in which the complete version of the CAPI is utilized is needed to further substantiate the influence of ethnic and demographic variables on the potential for child abuse. In the meantime, family practitioners and policy makers should not form biased views that one ethnic group is more likely to be abusive than another. It is probably poverty, lack of education, and young parental age that are more predictive of child abuse than ethnic group.

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